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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - October 20, 2005

REF: MINSK 1003

11. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk over the past week.

Human Rights

12. Approximately 100,000 Belarusians Unite in Solidarity Campaign

On October 16, the "Free Belarus" Coalition, including Nikita Sasim, journalist Irina Khalip, and wife of "disappeared" businessman Irina Krasovsky, organized a commemoration event for missing politicians, political prisoners and their families as part of the "day of solidarity" with those who have been persecuted by the GOB. Belarusians were asked to turn off their lights at home from 8 p.m. to 8:15 p.m. and place a lit candle in their window. According to the organizers, 100,000 Belarusians participated. Khalip stated, "If we organize such events every month, we will be able to bring people to the streets next spring....Together...we are the majority." Embassy observers witnessed few candles in apartments in downtown Minsk although we have received reports that more candles appeared in the apartment complexes in the outskirts of the city.

13. New Life Church Will Get Its Day in Court

On October 17, a Minsk judge agreed to hear the New Life Church's complaint regarding the GOB's decision to evict it from the cowshed in which the church community worships. The church pastor told the media he is optimistic the hearing will show the authorities acted illegally. [Note: The authorities have refused to reregister the church because it lacks a legal address.]

14. No Protection from Triple Jeopardy in Belarus

On October 17, Supreme Economic Court (SEC) Deputy Chairman Yevgeny Smirnov appealed the SEC's decision to annul the taxes and fines the tax authorities levied on the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC). Twice in the past year and one-half, the SEC annulled the BYR 155 million [USD 72,000] in taxes the tax authority insisted the BHC pay on grants from the European Union (EU). The SEC's past decisions were based on a May 10, 1994, memorandum between the EU and Belarus exempting EU grants from Belarusian taxes. However, if the SEC overrules its previous decisions - which seems likely since the deputy chairman launched the appeal - the authorities will reintroduce the former criminal charges against the BHC head and chief accountant. The SEC expects to make a decision later this month.

15. Third Way's Cartoon Website Is Back On-Line

As of October 19, short animated films poking fun at Lukashenko and his administration are available again on the Third Way's website (<http://mult.3dway.org>). Authorities shut down the website after the Belarusian KGB detained the cartoonists and raided their apartment on August 16 (reftel). Prosecutors are still investigating the group since the satirical cartoons defame and insult the President, a crime punishable by jail.

16. GOB vs. Trade Unions

On October 18, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) announced that Belarus is the "most anti-union country" in Europe. After documenting significant government interference and union rights violations, the ICFTU accused Lukashenko of "stifling independent trade union activity with the full force of the state." Separately on October 19, the Belarusian Congress of Democratic Trade Unions announced it has not been able to find a location in Belarus for its charter mandated triennial meeting. [Note: If the BCDTU does not hold the conference, the Ministry of Justice will issue a warning to the organization for violating its charter.] Citing intense pressure and increased scrutiny by authorities, BCDTU head Aleksandr Yaroshuk stated BCDTU would have to hold its convention abroad if the last venue rejects the organization's application.

17. Politically Active School Administrator Loses Appeal

On October 14, a Gorodok court rejected Belarusian

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Social Democratic Party "Hramada" member Leonid Gorovoi's appeal to reinstate him as a principal of a Varkhi school. Gorovoi opines the education department's politically motivated decision to dismiss him stemmed from his active civic position since the education department did not provide any explanation for its refusal to renew his contract.

Civil Society

18. Major Cities Need a Face Lift Before Elections

On October 19, Lukashenko ordered his government to renovate Minsk and the regional capitals by June 2006, roughly one month before the presidential elections. The President stated the capitals should be brought to an "ideal state" because "people should live in normal, comfortable cities and villages."

19. Belarus is Among the Who's Who of Corrupt Countries

On October 18, Transparency International (TI) announced Belarus ranks 107th among the 158 countries evaluated in "perception of corruption." TI determined the level of corruption in Belarus has increased and thus Belarus fell 33 spots on the list from last year. Belarus is now on par in perception of corruption with countries like Kazakhstan, Palestine, Ukraine and Zimbabwe.

10. Building Bridges Between Syrian and Belarusian Political Parties

On October 17, the Al-Baath Arab Socialist Party and the pro-government Belarusian Communist Party (BCP) signed an agreement aimed at "enhancing ties between both parties as well as...developing bilateral relations between two friendly countries." BCP First Secretary Natiana Golopiva emphasized her solidarity with the

Syrian party and expressed her admiration of Syria's role in the regional and international arena.

Economics

¶11. Broke the Law? Receive a Pardon!

On October 17, Lukashenko signed a decree, which allows the President to pardon ailing businesses when they receive economic sanctions for violation of tax, customs, commerce, and banking regulations even if courts imposed the penalties. The decree aims to "prevent unfounded bankruptcy of business entities [and to] preserve and develop enterprises of key importance to the country and its regions."

Bilateral Relations

¶12. Ukraine and Belarus: Becoming Closer?

On October 17 during Ukrainian Prime Minister Yuriy Yekhanurov's visit to Belarus, the GOB and the GOU signed several accords including an agreement to establish joint military research and development projects. Yekhanurov acknowledged the GOU's USD 134 million debt to Belarus dating from 1992 and agreed that Ukrainian businesses and not the GOU would pay it off by providing goods and services to Belarus. The debt had hindered the signing of a bilateral border treaty, which Ukraine needs to meet EU and NATO accession requirements.

Quote of the Week

¶13. On October 19, after his advisors presented him with a weaker economic forecast for the next year, Lukashenko expressed his disappointment at the performance of his cabinet:

"If the presidential elections turn out well next year, I will have to [create] the cabinet. And while doing that, I will see how effective you were during the previous five-year period. Why do I need pole-vaulters jumping beneath the bar? For this reason, I need a[n economic] forecast that aims very high."

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